

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SUBURBAN RHYTHM?
THE UNSUNG MUSIC OF LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

By Sarah Bennett

A Thesis Presented to the
FACULTY OF THE USC GRADUATE SCHOOL
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS SPECIALIZED JOURNALISM

December 2012

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Abstract

It has often been said that the city of Long Beach, California only exists to those who live there—and yet the laid-back autonomous port city 25 miles south of Downtown Los Angeles has been birthing major contributions to popular music for decades. What is it about Long Beach that has made it the logical home of global artists as diverse as Snoop Dogg and Sublime? And why is there little mention of other influential local acts such as Suburban Rhythm, the funky-punk band that catalyzed a 3rd-wave ska revival in neighboring Orange County? The story of Long Beach's music scene is not only a story of the city itself, but of Southern California's multicultural identity as a whole. This is the sonic history of a pop music's secret weapon—a forgotten city sitting in plain sight.

The Honey In the Carcass of the Lion

On a recent mild spring evening, dimly-lit Alex's Bar—on the Eastern edge of Long Beach, California's Cambodia Town—was alive with the Tecate-induced energy of the city's music community in bloom.

It was a Friday show at the punk-rock-meets-Dia-De-Los-Muertos dive bar and an interesting mix of local twenty and thirty-somethings brought the room to its 200-person capacity. The mixed crowd was not one that would commonly appear in Los Angeles just 25 miles to the north, but here in Long Beach—the most diverse large city in the nation¹—it's the norm. Black hip-hop heads in lifestyle-brand t-shirts hung with white Orange County-bred co-eds dressed on daddy's dime who talked to first-generation Hispanic desk-jobbers who mingled with thrift-store-plaid clad hipsters of all skin shades as tough-as-nails locals in home-silkscreened hoodies made their rounds.

An equally as diverse lineup was set to perform. One opening band played psych-tinged instrumental prog, its black female drummer channeling both Shiela E. and Zach Hill. Another sounded like 60s Brazilian tropicalia on a ride through Southern California's pan-Latino influences. And a third performed excerpts from their latest rock opera, which was somehow right at home with the both the sequin-loving Queen fans and leather-bound Iron Maiden lovers in the audience.

None of the bands were out of place that night and none of their fans were either. Instead, conversations about mutual friends, mutual experiences and mutual hometown love crept through the silence between songs and it didn't take long to realize that the whole bar was full of Long Beach's music-minded

¹ Ness, Carol. "S.F.'s Diversity Comeuppance." *San Francisco Chronicle* [San Francisco] 04 Jan 2001, n. pag. Print. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2001/04/01/MN34884.DTL>>. This statistic indicates that the likelihood of choosing two citizens at random and having them be of a different race or ethnicity is higher in Long Beach than anywhere else in the U.S.

faithfuls—each one separated from the other by fewer degrees than Kevin Bacon.

Not a bad turnout considering that the show's Facebook event page only listed 90 people attending.² Then again, Long Beach is a place where word of mouth is worth more than an army of Twitter followers and it's not every day that a band from this often-overlooked city on the outskirts of Los Angeles' endless sprawl plays a homecoming show with cross-country and European tours under its belt. Yet, here it was, April 2011, and the Long Beach-based Free Moral Agents were back in town, surrounded by friends at Alex's Bar after two months of shows that for the first time took the six-piece music collective from Krakow to Kansas City in support of their second album, *Control This*.

"It feels so good to be home and see all of you," said Free Moral Agents' half-Japanese vocalist Mendee Ichikawa, wearing a floral print dress and black leggings. She looked around the room, nodding lightly to all of the familiar faces in the audience while the rest of the band readied itself for the set. It was just after 1AM.

A sleepy guitar riff drifted over the crowd followed by a slow, almost tribal bongo beat that soon met Ichikawa's voice. "When I smile," she sang repeatedly until a crescendo no one knew was building broke into a head-slam flurry of melodic guitars, frenzied hi-hats and tweaked keyboard notes. A few minutes in, the beat changed up and dropped, as if it was now going backwards and Ichikawa's refrain returned, this time met with a pulsing bass line and stampeding Korg chords that dragged it into the next verse.

The song—like the others on their recent album *Control This*—is not quite rock, not quite jazz, but not quite electronic music either. It has the ghost of King Tubby and a love of Sonic Youth, but remains funky and trance-inducing like a late 60s psych-rock 7" all while shaking hips, bobbing heads and moving feet

² All descriptions of this concert are from notes taken by the author while attending the event.